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Dalit-futurist Feminism: New Alliances through Dalit Feminism and Indian Science Fiction

By Priteegandha Naik¹

Abstract

This article analyses the novel *Generation 14* by Priya Sarukkai Chabria from a convergent perspective of Dalit Studies (which encapsulates Dalit literature and Dalit feminism) and science fiction. I suggest that Indian science fiction that discusses caste with reference to the emerging technoscientific culture can be termed Dalit-futurism. I define this concept by drawing on the tradition of Dalit literature and science fiction and suggest that the Dalit-futurist texts seek to mutate caste to foreground its arbitrary structure. This paper uses the vocabulary of science-fiction criticism to analyze the mutation of caste in the fictional world and draws parallels with our social reality. It suggests that the social divisions in the fictional world echo the Brahmanical patriarchy of the Indian subcontinent. I theorize that the convergence of Dalit-futurism with feminist theory results in a new and transformative feminist configuration termed 'Dalit-futurist feminism'. I explicate Dalit-futurist feminism through the cyborg figure, which I suggest shares overlapping themes and concerns with the Dalit feminist standpoint theory, conceptualized by Sharmila Rege and Cyborg feminism conceptualized by Donna Haraway. I suggest that the main protagonists, Aa-Aa and Clone 14/54/G, embody the intersectional, revisionist, and inclusive feminism advocated by Rege and Haraway, arguing for an affiliation-based politics that rejects women's unity based on essentialized identities like sex, class, race, and caste and uncover the constructive nature of social processes that maintain and reproduce hierarchies, inequalities, and oppression.

Keywords: Dalit literature, Dalit feminism, Cyborg feminism, Indian science fiction, Dalit-futurism, Dalit-futurist feminism

Introduction

This paper re-reads Priya Sarukkai Chabria's *Generation 14* (2008), an Indian Science Fiction (ISF) novel, in conversation with Dalit feminism. I suggest that this unique alliance has the potential to unlock new ways to conceptualize a more expansive and inclusive intersectional feminist politics not just for Dalits, but for all Indians. I suggest that the novel be simultaneously approached from the dual perspective of science fiction and Dalit Studies encapsulating Dalit literature and Dalit feminism. I propose that Indian science fiction that actively engages with caste, exploring and speculating its transformations amidst a technoscientific culture, can be termed Dalit-futurism². Novels like *Leila* (2017), *Chosen Spirits* (2020), and others attempt to chart out

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² I draw precedence for the conceptualization of this term from Afrofuturism, coined by Mark Dery, and Chicanofuturism, coined by Catherine Ramirez who was inspired by the former. Dery's coinage of the term refers to the similarity between themes of Speculative fiction and the experiences of the African American slaves who experienced alienation and dehumanization. The movement has now expanded tremendously in scope, including a wide variety of art, literature, films, etc. Ramirez's conceptualization examines the intersections and experiences of

the various transformations that caste can undergo when interacting and intersecting with the emerging technoscientific culture. I analyze *Generation 14* through a converging lens of Dalit-futurism and intersectional feminism, a position echoed by Dalit and cyborg feminism. Cyborg feminism, initially conceptualized by Donna Haraway in the oft-cited essay, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century” (1985), is derived from the cyborg figures in science fiction and advocates a dismissal of dichotomies—man/woman, man/machine, animal/human—and instead privileges a blurring of boundaries and appeals to upend the structures upheld by traditional feminism that mainly addressed the concerns raised by white, middle-class, heterosexual women. Haraway suggests that the cyborg is an “illegitimate offspring” of 20th-century capitalism, patriarchy, technological advancement, and large-scale militarization. This embedded fragmentation in its origins enables the cyborg to undermine myths of “wholeness” and instead revel in fragmented, partial identities and subjectivities. Haraway uses the cyborg to signify the limits of the traditional feminist movement led by middle-class white feminists, unable to address the range of issues and concerns raised by women of color. Haraway is conscious of the criticism drawn due to a celebratory approach towards technology but notes that such an approach is only a half-reading because such interpretations “drop the feminism” (Lykke and Oleson 2004, 325). However, she admits that the Manifesto has been adopted and appropriated in wonderful ways by “young feminists,” who “embrace and use the cyborg of the manifesto to do what they want for their purposes” (Ibid).

Chela Sandoval identifies the “methodology of the oppressed” in Haraway’s conceptualization of cyborg feminism, proposing that it echoes the politics espoused by “indigenous resistance, “mestizaje” U.S. third world feminism, or the differential mode of oppositional consciousness,” wherein the subaltern, marginalized have strategized ways to develop an oppositional consciousness to subvert patriarchy, capitalism, et cetera (2012 125); this includes a combination of processes like the interpretation and deconstruction of the dominant cultural signs, the appropriation of the same oppressive signs to resist and build alternative systems that attempt to develop a more democratic and egalitarian society, and a “differential movement” which will help to realize the goal of a more democratic and inclusive society (121). Thus, Sandoval’s thesis clarifies how the cyborg privileges a non-essentialist, democratic, and inclusive feminist movement. Even Catherine Ramirez observes parallel strands between cyborg feminism and “alien consciousness,” a woman’s consciousness, drawn from mestizaje culture by Gloria Anzaldúa. Alien consciousness, like cyborg feminism, attempts to provide a grammar for women of colour to reconcile their positionality, beliefs, and cultural values to resist the alienation perpetrated by the colonizer’s culture, which promotes dualistic thinking, dichotomous structures, and institutions that have a linear approach to rationality (2002, 389-90).

Besides, several writers and critics have adopted the cyborg figure to symbolize the *genderization* of technology in everyday life. In *Technologies of the Gendered Body: Reading Cyborg Women* (1995), Anne Balsamo uses the cyborg to refer to the corporeal nature of the female body and the discursive practices involved in its social and cultural representation. Therefore, she proposes that the female body is a “hybrid creature,” like the cyborg. Such an approach is a valuable aid because the cyborg symbolizes an intersection of the body’s materiality and emerging technologies. Moreover, Balsamo notes that the cyborg represents ‘otherness,’ which threatens a stable human identity and instead privileges a fragmented identity that

Mexican Americans with folk culture and the emerging technoscientific culture. See “Black to the Future” in the anthology *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture* (1993) and “Deus ex Machina: Tradition, Technology, and the Chicanafuturist Art of Marion C. Martinez” in *Chicano and Chicana Art* (2019) respectively.

accommodates partial subjectivities (33). Lizelle Bisschoff constructs a theoretical framework to analyze the female cyborgs in African science fiction drawn from both the cyborg theory conceived by Haraway and African principles and ideologies infusing sci-fi and speculative fiction. She asserts that the female cyborgs in African narratives adopt the “meta-ideologizing” technique used by the oppressed to appropriate the dominant ideologies for their end. These cyborgs undermine the quest for wholeness and re-create, revise, and reinterpret the past to create new narratives, alternate visions, and templates for new futures (2020, 17). Sandoval and Ramirez use the cyborg to posit how ‘becoming’ is one of the essential processes in the feminist movement, while Balsamo and Bisschoff use it to build new frameworks that aid the analysis of the social and cultural construction of the female body.

These works prove the versatility of the Manifesto and provide a stepping stone for my argument. I suggest that both Dalit feminism and cyborg feminism argue for an affiliation-based politics that rejects women’s unity based on essentialized identities like sex, class, race, and caste; both uncover the constructive nature of social processes that maintain and reproduce hierarchies, inequalities, and oppression. Dalit feminism and cyborg feminism envision new kinds of feminist configurations that strike at the roots of the Brahmanical patriarchy, particular to the Indian subcontinent. Both approaches seek to encourage all women to embrace differences and “reinvent themselves” to be more democratic feminists.

This paper is divided into five sections. I contextualize the significance of this project against a background of contemporary scientific and technological advancements that have necessitated a need to conceive and comprehend the relationships between technology and culture. I concur with Dalit scholars and activists who emphasize the ideological and material reality of the caste system. I suggest that this material hold of caste influences old and emerging fields. Therefore, there is a need to understand its configurations with scientific and technological processes. Hence, I suggest that ISF provides a viable conduit to explore how technology interacts with caste and gender. I then demonstrate the affinities between Dalit literature and science fiction to chart out the contours and significance of this alliance. I suggest that *Generation 14* is an exemplary novel that illustrates this alliance, successfully representing the concept of Dalit-futurism and Dalit-futurist feminism. I then discuss how I conceptualize Dalit-futurism with the help of tools like the “novum” and the “cultural mega-text”, drawn from a tradition of both Dalit literature and science fiction criticism. I observe an analogous relationship between the fictional world in *Generation 14*, divided into four rigid social divisions and Brahmanical patriarchy constituting our social reality. I suggest that the resistance against the social divisions embodied in the cyborg figure and the support from other characters echo the ideals espoused by cyborg feminism and the Dalit feminist standpoint theory, conceptualized by Sharmila Rege. I propose that both approaches seek to convince one and all to re-learn and revise their feminist politics and affect their transformation.

Emerging Technoscientific Culture

Scholars and critics believed that industrialization and modernization—ways of incorporating technology in culture—would ultimately lead to the annihilation of caste. However, over time, caste has influenced, interacted, and transformed old and emerging fields. The pervasive influence of technology in society and culture manifests in hindered access to resources, through e-governance, digitization of identities, and development opportunities. Contrary to popular belief, technology is not an innocent additive to society. Langdon Winner refers to Robert Moses’s

transportation design to illustrate how the system prevented entry to buses mostly used by African Americans and other minority groups. Thus, Moses's project prevented these groups from accessing these new technologies that would have ensured a shorter journey, indicating the biases evident in design and implementation (1985, 28-9). Rahul De's study of e-governance centers in rural areas observes a similar asymmetrical relationship wherein services are designed to cater to the interests of the upper caste. Services concerning land records, information about market prices, computing services, internet access, and data on government schemes are of no use to little educated and mostly landless laborers. The omission of manual workers has created further problems for the Dalits, who used to ask for information and help from the clerks at the centers (2009 47-9). He suggests:

Caste affiliation and privilege played directly into the equation for extracting the new resources made available by powerful technology. Everyday practices of the dominant castes facilitated, and were facilitated by, the easy appropriation of the technology... With some caste groups being able to leverage the new technologies better, they are in a position to mobilize their jati with respect to others. (51)

Rahul De's thesis illustrates the implicit biases embedded in technologies. It also enables me to suggest that the introduction of technologies does not automatically ensure access to it. Another research study conducted by Scroll.in revealed that most women who were supposed beneficiaries to various government schemes were unable to apply because they lacked the proper documentation to apply for an Aadhaar card—school documents, birth certificates, or lack of husband/family's documents. The crisis is doubly compounded for Dalit women who work as landless laborers and usually lack documentation. Thus, the existence of technology does not automatically imply access to it (Khera 2019). Dilip Mandal's article exemplifies this phenomenon. Mandal suggests that the unequal distribution of access to the internet has ensured the continuing domination of legacy media, even in supposedly "democratic" spaces (2020). There is a straight line that determines access to technology that usually excludes the marginalized. Kiruba Munusamy, a Dalit lawyer in the Supreme Court of India, highlights the compounded abuse on online platforms faced by women from marginalized and minority communities. She references several incidents wherein law enforcement agencies have registered complaints and arrested online abusers against the objections raised by upper-caste women. In contrast, the police circumvented registering her complaint against casteist remarks she was facing online (2018). Munusamy's article highlights how the patterns of caste discrimination and violence are replicated from the real to the virtual world, further highlighting the influence of caste on technology. Dalit women reveal that threats on the internet target their caste as well as gender (2017). Moreover, Dalit women face discrimination not just from men but also upper-caste women who replicate the ideologies espoused by Brahmanical patriarchy. Thus, it is essential to consider technology as a variable while reconsidering the relationship between caste, society, and modernization.

This bias is also evident in the lack of attention paid to developing effective technologies that would have led to an end to manual scavenging, a caste-based profession. Deaths related to manual scavenging have increased over the past few years (Nath, 2020). Many of these deaths have occurred due to workers inhaling poisonous gases during cleaning septic tanks. The delay in registering the need for technical solutions to eradicate manual scavenging emphasizes how the needs of the marginalized, especially Dalits, are neglected. Mandal's essay and Munusamy's experiences underscore the hierarchical nature embedded in access to resources, including

education and technology. It lends weight to the notion of the “non-neutrality” of technology. It is important to recognize that technologies are not external forces adopted by cultures and societies but are also adaptive. This fine distinction enables us to comprehend how extant cultures transform new and emerging spheres. These studies prove the necessity to analyze the various ways through which caste and gender can affect and influence technology.

The Alliance between Dalit Literature and Indian Science Fiction

Dalit literature is a broad genre of writing that exclusively engages with the lived experiences of Dalit lives. It is a literary extension of the anti-caste movement that seeks to disrupt the hegemony of mainstream literary representation of Dalits and caste. Dalit literature aims to bring about change by demonstrating the inter-relationships between the lived experiences of Dalits and the overarching caste structure that creates multi-layered systems of oppression. It relies heavily on biographical details, often fleshed out in autobiographies, short stories, novels, et cetera. Unlike other autobiographical fiction that emphasizes value-laden lessons prescribed by the individual, Dalit autobiographies foreground how caste-affected social and cultural processes shape individual experiences. Anusha Hariharan suggests that Dalit women’s autobiographies are interventionist mechanisms that create a nuanced picture of the intersections of caste and gender. She indicates that these autobiographies can provide methodological tools to understand how women’s lives are structured and influenced by caste, gender, and geographical location, affecting faith and kinship networks (2020, 146). Hariharan rightly observes that “these works call attention to understanding women’s political work as a form of ethical transformation” as autobiographies allow the “teller” to reconstitute the self by critically narrating their experience (146, 148). Dalit women’s writing presents an honest perspective about the effects of caste from a gender perspective. It seeks to effect change by uncovering the Brahmanical nature of patriarchy in India. Dalit feminism, enshrined in Dalit women’s writing, attempts to strike at the root of the structure of inequality by implicating both caste and gender. It registers resistance against being clubbed under the labels of ‘genderless caste’ or ‘casteless gender’. This intersection seeks to deconstruct and uncover the naturalized mechanisms and strategies that uphold Brahmanical patriarchy. It problematizes the notions of caste and gender and exposes their interconnections instead of treating them as separate identitarian categories.

Similarly, science fiction’s penchant for alternate realities, imaginative worldbuilding, and a willingness to engage the social with the technological enables it to reveal the constructive nature of our empirical reality. Science fiction is a genre that can merge different spheres on one platform and engage in a prolonged exploration of these encounters. It has proven to be one of the most versatile genres, being used for various projects. Patricia Warrick and Henry Greenburg edited *Political Science Fiction: An Introductory Reader* (1974), which uses science fiction stories to demonstrate different political concepts and the need to develop flexible and alternate political structures to keep pace with the changes wrought by technology (4). Istvan-Csicsery Ronay Jr. points out that Jean Baudrillard and Donna Haraway have used the language of science fiction to explicate the concept of hyperreality and cyborg feminism, respectively. He notes that science fiction is a genre that “embeds scientific-technological concepts in the sphere of human interest” and thereby discusses its social and ethical ramifications (1991, 388).

Additionally, the SF register has also been used by Black writers, giving rise to a rich sub-genre called Afro-futurism that imagines Black futures and questions the representation of African Americans in White science fiction narratives. Amanda Rico observes that Black women writers

and artists have also utilized the SF register to imagine and re-imagine their identity and future concerning race, technology, society, and culture (2018, 35). Rico suggests that this register enables them to challenge the fixity of concepts like women, gender, and race and re-imagine a new subjectivity for Black women through the figure of the cyborg, robot, alien, vampire, etc. Science fiction's privileging of the 'Other', exploring feelings of alienation through these figures establishes another pillar of association with Dalit Literature. These works demonstrate science fiction's ability to form alliances to problematize the process of naturalization embedded in our social reality. The transformation enacted on social processes in the fictional world foregrounds the arbitrariness and artificiality of these processes. I suggest that *this* is the point of intersection between ISF and Dalit feminism. The latter intervenes to disturb the hegemony of male Dalit writers who wish to subsume oppression under the label of caste and upper-caste women who seek to subsume it under gender (Pan 2018 4-5). Anandita Pan proposes that such attempts to homogenize can be resisted by acknowledging the mutations that Dalit women undergo due to multiple axes of discrimination, i.e., caste and gender. She suggests that:

'Dalit woman', a hybrid category, gets affected by structures of caste and gender. As a mutant resulting from the intersection of 'Dalit' and 'woman', 'Dalit woman' carries cyborg-like qualities of hybridity. 'Dalit woman' becomes a unique constitution which reflects the harms caused by mutation, and in its political formulation, creates scope for a Harawayian solution through affiliation-based politics. (2)

Pan's thesis is a valuable starting point for my analysis. However, I suggest that few possible modifications can be brought to bear upon this conceptualization. I suggest that the 21st century has inserted a new sphere into the structures of oppression, i.e., technology. The social categories of caste and gender prompt differential access to technological resources. The materiality of caste and gender and the non-neutrality of technology leads me to highlight the need to explore the various configurations that may arise from such networks. It is necessary to use different mechanisms to explore the multiple ways through which caste may be transformed. Science fiction's ability to explore these lends it an advantageous position to understand different aspects of caste.

Dalit-futurism

I suggest that ISF is the perfect conduit to explore the relationships and intersection amongst caste, gender, and technology. The establishment of the non-neutrality of technology opens multiple avenues for the examination of these interactions. I recommend that the study of caste in Indian science fiction can be subsumed under the term Dalit futurism. Dalit futurism envisions an affinity with Dalit literature, which attempts to chart the past and present moment of caste configurations. Twitter and Instagram handles run by Dalit activists and organizations, YouTube channels, and new age biographical fiction like *Caste Matters* and *Coming Out as A Dalit*, aim to capture the contemporary aspects of caste, highlighting its effects on different generations. Indian science fiction on caste similarly negotiates with Dalit futures. Here, I do not claim a prophetic potential for Dalit futurism but instead propose that the transformation of caste, conceived in tandem with its interaction with culture, society, and technology, actively challenges the

mainstream discourse that advocates and advances a belief in a post-casteist world. Mimi Mondal remarks:

In a world where fundamental laws can be rewritten, it is also illuminating which of them aren't. The author's priorities are more openly on display when a culture of non-humans is still patriarchal, there are no queer people in a far-future society...In a speculative world, where it is possible to rewrite them [laws, rules, stereotypes], leaving them unchanged is also political. (2019)

This enables me to suggest the importance of discussing caste in science fiction. I suggest that Dalit-futurism can be sketched out with the help of the novum and the mega-text. Naik draws from Darko Suvin's definition of cognitive estrangement and modifies the definition of the novum:

The novum can refer to the inclusion of those new elements, either invented, innovated, modified or adapted, different from the reader's empirical reality, that may or may not be supplied with a logical explanation. The implication is that the processes and phenomena occurring in the "zero world" may be altered in the fictional universe, but this alteration would be rationally treated. I propose that the novums exist along a spectrum based on the presence or absence of a supplementary explanation. This new interpretation of the novum also includes the ways that social, cultural, and political forces have been substantially altered in the text. These elements are naturalized—that is, portrayed as organic entities of the textual landscape—but are defamiliarizing for readers because those elements differ from their reality. Thus, these are the "new" elements operating and functioning as units of worldbuilding, in Indian S.F. These novums exist along a spectrum in terms of integration with other elements of the narrative, helping to transform the atmosphere of the fictional universe. (2020, 18)

Naik suggests that these novums are the "building blocks" of the fictional universe, aiding the reader to navigate the defamiliarized world. Also, the treatment and appropriation of the S.F. themes, icons, tropes, devices from the S.F. "mega-text" are socially and culturally located; thereby, lending a socio-cultural and geographical characteristic to the novum. Dalit-futurism draws on these tools to speculate about caste futures by defamiliarizing caste, by mutating its various elements to foreground the arbitrary and constructed nature of the caste system. These elements are used as 'access points' to build a new/imaginary world; they function like an 'access point' to our experiential reality. These transformed elements then harken to the elements in our empirical world. I propose that in addition to charting out the contours of the transformation of caste with respect to technology, *Generation 14* also offers us new visions and alliances between Dalit feminism and feminist science fiction through the cyborg figure.

Generation 14 portrays a dystopic world in the 24th century in which scientific and technological advancements have enabled the institutionalization of genetic engineering to control the environment and the population. This dystopic society, referred to as the Global Community, is divided into four social divisions that are rigidly segregated into Originals, Firehearts, Zombies, and the Clones. At the top of the social order, the Originals have special rights and are the closest to the equivalent of human beings; they have genetically altered themselves to attain longevity and disease-free life. Moreover, the Originals have complete control and authority over the systems to

maintain the Global Community. The Originals accrue the most privileges, followed by the Zombies, who are pre-programmed to maintain law and order, the Firehearts, the poets in society, and then the Clones, the service class. The Originals occupy the highest position:

The colony of Originals is kept segregated and pampered for the purpose so that fresh Originals and their blueprints are available for societal betterment. Their Matings are brief and pre-selected to give optimum results. At least five out of each batch of first-generation Clones are reserved as backups for each new Original. (Chabria 15)

Other than these classes, the Global Community also consist of mutants, who are the most marginalized in society and have no rights, marked as the “Others”:

“Who are The Others?”

“Anyone – or any group – they designate as ‘The Others’. There are no markers to identify The Others. It’s arbitrary, and keeps changing with each victory and each celebration.” Couplet shrugged.

“What have the Others done?”

“Nothing in particular, Clone.” The couplet was turning Scarlet within its sparkling net. “But the others live, don’t they? And they shouldn’t! That’s their crime.” It whimpered and crumbled into a purple ball. “They are the ones we can never save. They are the ones who have never been saved!” (Chabria 269)

The mutants are the ‘Others’ who have the least number of rights and are often used for gruesome and brutal activities for the entertainment of the Originals. The Global Community professes an ideology that emphasizes internal sameness and external differences, thus pitching the need to maintain hierarchy and inequality. The Global Community is a totalitarian society wherein opposition to its ideologies results in banishment to ‘Paradise Islands’ after being lobotomized.

Scholars like Sami Ahmad Khan and Suparno Banerjee have identified the nature of domination in the novel through the structures of caste and fascist ideologies. Suparno Banerjee suggests that the novel collates western systems of power with Indian forms of hegemony in the form of a dystopia. Banerjee uses Althusser’s framework of ISA-RSA to suggest that totalitarianism is maintained with the help of Zombies, manipulation of the Firehearts, and the interpellation of the Clones (2010, 119-20). He suggests that the novel brings together class and caste-based oppression and critiques the post-nationalist fantasy promoted by Indian historiography by stringing together diverse narratives in the form of “Visitations” across time, place, human and non-human entity, to demonstrate the plurality of histories (117). He proposes that the animal-centric Visitations refer to the Jataka tales, which discuss Buddha’s various avatars. Instead of collapsing caste into class, as Banerjee’s thesis attempts, Sami Ahmad Khan reviews the novel by analyzing it in conversation with B.R. Ambedkar’s famous tract, *The Annihilation of Caste*. He compares the genetically engineered divisions in the novel with the arbitrarily designed divisions in the Indian caste system, suggesting that the collective consciousness promoted in the fictional world replicates the caste consciousness in our empirical world. He suggests that the genetically modified society places status and hierarchy in the gene template of the individual, thus transforming the society from a “division of labor” to a “division of laborers”, as suggested

by Ambedkar. Khan proposes that the clones are perfect stand-ins for the Shudras in society, but the Originals, Zombies, and Firehearts are a mixture of the three varnas, i.e., Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and Vaishyas, as they collectively rule the Clones. Khan's analysis also suggests the fascist nature of the Global Community, built on the oppression and marginalization of an arbitrarily designated 'Other' (2018).

I concur with Banerjee and Khan's analyses of the novel, which examines the Global Community through the framework of the Indian caste system with respect to other systems of discrimination. However, I veer away from their analyses by suggesting that the social divisions portrayed in the novel are a mutation/transformation of Brahmanical patriarchy, of the kind first described by B.R. Ambedkar. Ambedkar suggested that patriarchy should be considered a twin of Brahminism (14). He theorized that the caste system was a system of "graded inequality," maintained by the system of endogamy and rituals like sati, child marriages, and enforced widowhood to maintain the "surplus" of women. This system ensured the prevention of intermarriages between castes and successfully maintained control over women's agency and sexuality and upheld the belief in the "purity-pollution" axis. This system of inclusion of 'same' and exclusion of 'others' is a characteristic of the caste system, which also interconnects caste and gender, such that upper-caste women are more privileged than the lower-caste women. Sunaina Arya and Aakash Singh Rathore explain:

'Lower' caste women are most prone to violence as they face oppression at three levels: (1) caste, as subject to caste oppression at the hands of 'upper' castes; (2) class, as laborers subject to class-based oppression, also mainly at the hands of 'higher' castes who form the bulk of landowners; and (3) gender, as women who experience patriarchal oppression at the hands of all men, including men of their own caste. (2020, 8)

It is important to remember that this is a social system practiced by everyone, regardless of their caste and gender. Thus, it is not just the Brahmins who adhere to these practices but all who are complicit. This clarification implicates society itself. In the novel, Chabria mutates the caste system, understood as Brahmanical patriarchy, into the rigid social divisions classified as the Originals, Firehearts, Zombies, and Clones, wherein men hold the most superior positions. True to the project, the combined authority of the Originals, Zombies, and the Firehearts symbolizes the complicity of our society in upholding Brahmanical patriarchy. Here, the system is maintained by the controlled practice of "Mating", which is prohibited to all except the Originals.

Moreover, these "Matings" are also predetermined between the Originals. Mating is thus an altered or mutated rendition of endogamy, which holds up the structure of Brahmanical patriarchy. The mating then functions as a novum, which refers to the system of endogamy practiced in India, even today. Additionally, even though the clones seem to occupy a low position, akin to the Shudras and Backward caste, there is a hierarchy even amongst the clones. The S.S. Clone is the lowest in the social order but higher than the mutants, while the Terror clones are higher than the S.S. Clones. I suggest that this is a parodic rendition of the various debates between different *jatis* that claim to be higher than others. The system of inclusion-exclusion is maintained by ensuring inter-division recreation, which is strictly arranged at the end of each week, with a pre-planned set of activities that all Clones must participate in.

Thus, the mutation of different elements of the caste system—endogamy, internal hierarchy amongst castes, internal systems of recreation to maintain kinship—function as novums, which

enable the reader to navigate the defamiliarized fictional world. Our social location and understanding of the caste system govern our comprehension of this defamiliarization. Thus, Chabria's exploration of caste through a science fiction lens foregrounds the construction of these caste practices and processes. Science fiction's ability to "play"³ around with different features enables it to entertain various permutations and combinations of different elements from the emerging technoscientific cultures with the caste system. These "caste futures" explore two distinct features, that is, firstly, by exaggerating certain tendencies, it emphasizes upon a milder version of that tendency as it exists in society and, secondly, makes the reader more amenable to the possibility of such transformations (in the present and possible future). Thus, modifying the caste system in the form of mating, social circle and networks, and hierarchies foregrounds our experiences with these practices and processes in our empirical reality. These novums are augmented with our cultural experiences that help the reader comprehend the alternate world in *Generation 14*.

Dalit-futurist Feminism

This section is a continued exploration of Dalit-futurism from a feminist perspective. I suggest that in addition to exploring and speculating caste futures, Dalit-futurist feminism brings together Dalit feminism with feminisms upheld by science fiction. In *Generation 14*, I perceive a new feminist alliance through the cyborg figure, which embodies perspectives forwarded by Dalit feminism and represents a novel manner of resistance based on ally-ship and affiliation.

The monotony of the Global Community is broken by the transformation of Clone 14/54/G. This Clone is the descendant of the Original, Aa-Aa, who had started to rebel against the ideologies prescribed by the Global Community in a previous era. The Clone is a cyborg who starts experiencing "visitations," memories, and records preserved by her ancestor. These memories are a malfunction that leads the Clone to adopt various subterfuge strategies to disguise them, storing them like diary entries in a "cell-chip within my neural circuitry" (15). However, she can no longer maintain the disguise when she impulsively enters the fighting arena during the rehearsals for The Celebrations. She is immediately separated from her Clone-twins and placed under observation. The Originals believe that they can manipulate this transformation to extract information about Aa-Aa's last message, which would have resulted in disastrous consequences for their authority and power.

I suggest that Aa-Aa and Clone 14/54/G are both cyborgs and represent an exemplary, more inclusive, expansive, and democratic feminist reconfiguration model. I propose that they embody the ideals espoused by Dalit feminist standpoint theory and Cyborg feminism theorized by Sharmila Rege and Donna Haraway, respectively. I aim to analyze how the cyborg figure, as portrayed in *Generation 14*, is analogous to the revisionist feminist consciousness envisaged by Rege. Donna Haraway's conceptualization of cyber politics has been criticized for being too totalizing, especially from a postcolonial perspective⁴. However, I believe that the critique of the

³ I refer to "play" from a post-modernist perspective

⁴ In "Caught between the Goddess and the Cyborg: Third-World Women and the Politics of Science in Three Works of Indian Science Fiction." (2004), Suchitra Mathur's analysis of *Harvest* and *The Calcutta Chromosome* indicates that in Indian science fiction, the cyborg oscillates between a representation of the inequalities between the first and the third world and a "postcolonial new human" that signifies a blurring of boundaries between the natural, supernatural, and the technological. In "Ruptured Bodies and Invaded Brains: Biotechnology as Bioviolence in Indian Science Fiction" (2015), Suparno Banerjee suggests that for Third World subjects, the cyborg is not a site for freedom to subvert dominant and oppressive structures because access to technology is built into the model of

man-machine hybridity should not be considered in such a literal sense. I suggest that Haraway's conceptualization of the man-machine hybridity is but one aspect of the Manifesto. I refer instead to the accommodation of fractured identities through the framework of "oppositional consciousness," which opens new avenues for exploring affiliation-based politics.

Aa-Aa's transformation is symptomatic of the Dalit feminist standpoint forwarded by Sharmila Rege; this theory advocates an informed discussion between the mainstream and the marginalized, emphasizing the need to re-evaluate and re-conceptualize a more inclusive epistemological position that translates the "discourse of sexual politics from individual narratives to collective contestations of hierarchies" (1998, WS43-44). Her theorization incorporates the necessity to educate oneself and learn about the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized to come to an informed decision about one's feminist consciousness. She argues:

A Dalit feminist standpoint is seen as emancipatory since the subject of its knowledge is embodied and visible (i.e., the thought begins from the lives of Dalit women and these lives are present and visible in the results of the thought). This position argues that it is more emancipatory than other existing positions and counters pluralism and relativism by which all knowledge-based and political claims are thought to be valid in their way. It places emphasis on individual experiences within socially constructed groups and focuses on the hierarchical, multiple, changing structural power relations of caste, class, ethnic, which construct such a group. It is obvious that the subject/agent of Dalit women's standpoint is multiple, heterogeneous even contradictory, i.e., that the category 'Dalit woman' is not homogenous - such a recognition underlines the fact that the subject of Dalit feminist liberatory knowledge must also be the subject of every other liberatory project and this requires a sharp focus on the processes by which gender, race, class, caste, sexuality - all construct each other. Thus, we agree that the Dalit feminist standpoint itself is open to liberatory interrogations and revisions. The Dalit feminist standpoint which emerges from the practices and struggles of Dalit woman, we recognize, may originate in the works of Dalit feminist intellectuals but it cannot flourish if isolated from the experiences and ideas of other groups who must educate themselves about the histories, the preferred social relations, and utopias and the struggles of the marginalized. A transformation from 'their cause' to 'our cause' is possible for subjectivities can be transformed. By this, we do not argue that non-Dalit feminists can 'speak as' or 'for the' Dalit women, but they can 'reinvent themselves as Dalit feminists. (WS45)

Thus, Rege's thesis advocates for affiliation-based, not identity-based feminist politics. She argues for a move away from simply listing 'difference' to an approach that examines the "social relations that convert 'difference' into oppression" (WS40). I suggest that Aa-Aa's transformation demonstrates her "reinvention" as a "Dalit feminist," along the lines indicated by Rege. Aa-Aa begins to question the ideologies of the Global Community after she has an encounter with her

inequalities between the first and the third world. In a chapter titled, "India" in the *Routledge Companion to Cyberpunk Culture* (2020), he argues that Indian cyberpunk does not necessarily follow the Western established patterns, which portrays the cyborg as a symbol of techno-sublime liberation. Instead, Indian sf "comes in strange guises—sometimes as subaltern discourses, sometimes as a humanistic condemnation of the posthuman, and sometimes as postmodern mimicry of western cyberpunk" (408).

Clone, who is disassembled for Aa-Aa's lung transplant. She starts questioning her privileged position, enjoyed at the cost of others. This encounter leaves a deep scar and prompts her to explore the contours of her being. It encourages her to investigate the reasons for the deep divisions in society, which exalts her position while depriving others.

I began researching the histories of the subcontinent, and each period, it seemed, had stories that unfurled in strange quicksilver tongues, each like a stream of mercury, alluring and poisonous, for such investigations were not encouraged. But I was thrilled: it was as if I were expanding, tight and luminously with each 'discovery,' and I quietly persisted. (Chabria, 134)

Her tryst with these research inquiries gradually starts transforming her consciousness, beliefs, and ideologies. In direct contrast to the Global Community, she explores and publishes alternate histories, tales of the marginalized, attempting to expand the scope of "who counts". Her explorations and changing consciousness also result in physical transformations, leading to a period of extreme fertility in which she produces four offspring, an anomaly. Her boldness and rebellion against the dictates of the Global Community emboldens her to take a lover, Pasha with whom she transgresses sexually,

He was captivated by the unfolding secret of my body, as was I by his willingness to experiment with touch and emotion that was not enhanced by technology. We dismissed all sex tools; we had sex with each other like primitive people. This was new. Songs seemed sweeter when we were together, and food tasted better, colors sparkled, and our bodies would fill with nectarine energy merely by imagining each other's touch. (142)

The sexual encounter with Pasha is a rejection and a challenge to the strict control over sexuality instituted by the Global Community. The Dalit feminist standpoint theory and cyborg feminism are evocative of a new feminist consciousness and configuration, reminiscent of Kimberly Crenshaw's advocacy of 'intersectionality'⁵. I suggest that Haraway's conceptualization of the cyborg is a layered conceptualization of the ideology of intersectional feminism that was in the process of articulation when this article was first published. The cyborg represents the dizzying, chaotic experiences of the late 20th century that seeks to accommodate equally fragmentary, disjointed, and chaotic experiences of women amidst an inundation of technology. Haraway suggests that the cyborg is embedded with irony. The irony, at its core, is about holding oppositional and contradictory elements together, which neither aspire nor will dissolve into unity. These elements, embedded with tensions, contain a degree of ambivalence and simultaneity. Similarly, Haraway suggests that the cyborg also embodies a beautiful play between faith and anti-faith, tribute and parody, because it takes the known and destabilizes it. This deformation is blasphemous because there is a complex feature of play, which gives rise to multiple possibilities (306-7).

⁵ In "Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race and Sex: A Black Feminist Critique of Anti-discrimination doctrine, feminist theory, and antiracist politics," Kimberle Crenshaw suggested that race and sex as separate categories could not adequately capture the multi-faceted experiences of Black women who experienced discrimination as a result of the intersection of race and gender. She dismissed this "single-axis" framework and advocated for a multi-axis understanding of how race and gender intersect to produce discrimination.

The cyborg is neither faithful to man nor machine but is a complex interplay between various elements that displace the centrality of man and gives rise to a hybrid identity that privileges a more inclusive and democratic politics. This kind of integration is a deliberate move that subverts notions of purity and essentialization. This privileging of fragments also undercuts the value on origins because of the conflation of various elements in an asymmetrical entanglement. Haraway refers to Chela Sandoval's notion of "oppositional consciousness" to support her formulation of cyborg politics. Sandoval suggests that a single social identity and category is often too restrictive and not available to "women of color" to explain their experiences. On the other hand, an "oppositional consciousness" favors the construction of alliances based on their experiences of "otherness, difference, and specificity" (312). This approach is a conscious effort to unite due to shared experiences of exclusion, a "conscious appropriation of negation" (ibid). Thus, the movement is conceptualized based on affinity politics and not identity.

Aa-Aa's education exemplifies the repositioning of her own identity and consciousness due to research, which included stories and histories of the marginalized. Even Rege's critique locates the refashioning of identities as a Dalit feminist based on Dalit women's negation. Aa-Aa's transformation, which prompts her to perceive and acknowledge the lack of justice and inequality in the fictional society, embodies the transformation envisioned by Rege and Haraway. Both discuss the need to challenge practices and rituals and wish to strike at the roots of the system, which engenders these inequalities. Aa-Aa's message is expected to upend the very roots of the Global Community before she is killed at The Celebrations. Let us now move on to discuss the representation of Clone 14/54/G.

Clone 14/54/G is a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism" that has been genetically modified, containing the DNA of her ancestor, Aa-Aa, but pre-programmed to fulfill the functions of a service worker (306). This section attempts to demonstrate how the cyborg figure need not be limited to the annals of science fiction but can be utilized to envision a new and inclusive feminist consciousness. The Clone is a cyborg, who is programmed to lead a controlled life where she works, eats dry rations provided by the Global Community, and relaxes on the weekend with her clone twins, like clockwork. The clones have been designed to carry out all kinds of services but are not programmed to smile, cannot menstruate, and don't have hair. This description indicates the pure functionality of the clones designed with the aim of efficiency. The inability to smile also shows the minimal range of emotions, feelings, and thoughts available to the clones, indicating the complete control exercised by the Global Community. However, the Clone breaks away from this functionality as she starts remembering from the memories of her ancestor's DNA. This malfunction, which would have immediately led to her disassembly if discovered, also gives her the ability to conceal her internal transformations. Her initial bewilderment is accompanied by a firm belief in the ideals set out by the Global Community: "Why should anyone turn against one's community? Besides, what else is there?" (Chabria, 35).

Her confusion over this transformation is spotted by her Clone-twin 14/53/G, who has experienced similar memories. She hands her a red pill that would inhibit the effects of the pill issued by the Global Community, indicating a flourishing rebellion in secret. As the Clone receives fractured "visitations" or memories, she also begins to undergo physical transformations – sprouting body hair, a mole, and menstruating. As the "visitations" continue, the Clone starts to question the norms of her "being", concluding that she is becoming an "in-between species" (59). I suggest that this marks the beginning of the transformation that the Clone undergoes due to the fracturing of identities. Haraway and Rege emphasize the need to acknowledge the differences produced as a result of social location and identity. Both suggest that it is not the privileging of

one category over the other but their intersection that would lead to more democratic and inclusive feminist politics. Haraway's reference to affiliation-based politics based on "oppositional consciousness" and Rege's development of the Dalit feminist standpoint theory must be read as a free-flowing conversation that informs and engages mainstream discourse with the marginalized. Both concepts make space to accommodate fractured identities and fragmented experiences. The emphasis is on rejuvenating as a feminist who acknowledges the experiences of the marginalized as equally legitimate and valid. The Clone's acceptance as an "in-between species" represents the beginning of an alliance based on the "visitations" and her own experiences of inequality in the fictional society. The Clone's transformation is a fecund site for exploring the mechanics of affiliation-based movement for feminist politics.

The Clone's search for identity is furthered by her encounter with the gladiator at the rehearsal for The Celebrations; he suggests that her continuing transformation can also make her a mutant (67–8). This constant negotiation of her identity represents learning and revising positions, adding knowledge; this process is in continuous flux and results in the formation of a new cyborg semiology that resists traditional categorization (epistemology of the fictional world). The Clone constantly questions her knowledge, and the contemporary epistemology that she begins to formulate, privileges her learning and transformation from subversive memories, histories, accounts, and encounters:

Who am I? 'Clone 14/54/G' is no longer the answer. I am more – and less – than what I was. Less sure, less safe, less isolated. More curious, more in pain, more resolute about my uncertainties. And with more words at my command. (95)

The Originals assign the Leader and the Couplet to coax the secret message from the Clone and interpret the new memories. The Couplet, naturally attuned to the importance of marginalized knowledge, aids Clone in concealing her real transformation, revealing the underground resistance movement. Interestingly, even though Clone's experiences are as memories and visitations, she realizes that the words are no longer just Aa-Aa's but also contain additions from her consciousness. Thus, the Clone has started to mutate – both from and as a result of the traces and fragments from her ancestor (110). While Haraway's cyborg accommodates these contradictions, Rege's theorization offers us a solution by proposing the need to revise our knowledge.

Furthermore, the consequences of the Clone's transformations are evident when she goes on a hunger strike after being denied dry rations; in another instance, she manipulates the situation and the Originals by lying that she remembers the Aa-Aa's secret message to secure rations for Couplet. The Clone's hybrid identity is acknowledged by the Couplet and the Leader, who later refers to her as "Aa-Aa 14/54/G" (Chabria, 250). The cyborg is a hybrid, wherein it is difficult to demarcate where are Aa-Aa ends and the Clone begins. These blurred boundaries facilitate a fluidity that cannot be categorized. This assimilation of fractured identities reaches its apotheosis when Clone announces the message that leads to an instantaneous protest: "Remember with me: I am a human being; I claim my birth right to be human" (272).

Chabria leaves the reader with an ambiguous picture – the reader cannot determine if the words belong to Aa-AA or Clone or "Aa-Aa 14/54/G". This ambivalence leads me to associate it with Haraway's conceptualization of a new "cyborg semiology" (318). She asserts that this is an alternate mode of semiology that produces an alternative mode of meaning, different from the dominant order, which resists traditional forms of classification and binary structures of thinking. The Clone's transformation does result in a new semiology when she escapes the Global

Community to head to the dark side of the moon, where the rebellion is flourishing. She declares: “Suddenly I knew what I should do: I should love tremendously and way beyond myself. This is the only way” (Chabria, 282). Moreover, this resistance is driven by the Clone, the Leader, the Couplet, *and* the Mutants. I suggest that this alliance exemplifies the transformed consciousness, representative of the feminist consciousness espoused by Rege.

Cyborg politics privileges heteroglossia and polyphony and acknowledges the futility of pursuing origin stories and the idea of an organic, whole self. The Clone stops looking for Aa-Aa’s voice towards the end and comes into her own, assimilating the fragments from Aa-Aa and herself in an asymmetrical entanglement. She realizes the beautiful possibilities of moving beyond “becoming” Aa-Aa. She is happy enough to occupy the interstices, privileging the act of “becoming” and learning instead of achieving stasis. I suggest that the physical transformations that both undergo symbolize the transformations of a woman becoming a Dalit feminist. Rege and Haraway essentially indicate the need for privileged upper-class and upper-caste women to learn and educate themselves about the experiences and perspectives of the marginalized. This learning is a process of becoming, unbecoming, and rebecoming that every feminist will undergo. Aa-Aa and the Clone’s transformation is symbolic of the same process.

The novum and the cultural mega-text function as tools that help apprehend the socio-cultural landscape of the text. These tools aid the reader to trace and chart out the various ways in which caste and caste practices have been transformed in the fictional narratives in the text. Thus, Dalit-futurism is not limited to prophetic extrapolations of the futures of caste but draws on and comments on caste’s present and past trajectory. This is an important project because the defamiliarization of caste is one way to conceive alternative visions and perspectives about the caste system. I add on to Pan’s thesis and propose that it is not just caste and gender that mutates the ‘Dalit woman’; the mutation results from the intersections between caste, gender, and technology. Moreover, it is not just the ‘Dalit woman’ who mutates but the ‘Dalit feminist,’ who educates herself and engages in effecting a self-transformation that would result in a multi-pronged attack on Brahmanical patriarchy.

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